Publish or Perish: Challenges faced by Academicians in Research Publications at the University of Zambia

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Abstract

This study was undertaken at the University of Zambia, and had a two-fold focus: to establish challenges faced by academic members of staff in publishing their work in scholarly journals; and to illuminate the factors that can enhance publication output by members of the academe in Zambia. Interviews were conducted with 33 senior lecturers and Deans from the 7 schools. Data was analyzed qualitatively using emerging themes from the participants' responses. The findings show that lecturers at the University of Zambia were involved in both basic and action research and yet, the publication output was low. Among the challenges identified were lack of research funds, overreliance on western researchers who have their own research agendas, lack of mentorship among young lecturers, lack of visibility of internally generated journals to be used as sources when writing which were mostly hard copies and processing time for some journals was longer than expected.

Background

A large body of research points to the fact that the tri-focal functions of an academic in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are research, teaching and community engagement (Badat 2009; Waghid 2002). In many cases universities are the main drivers of research and also spearhead the dissemination of the findings of such research (Kapp et al, 2011). If research, teaching and community engagement fade away, knowledge production for the country would be seriously affected which may unfortunately also affect university ranking and, ultimately to the perishing of the institution. Crammer (2013) for example asserts that productivity of a university can be measured

by research and publication. Shumba (2010) states, similarly that the quality of a university is measured by its research output. Miller et al. (2011) equally state that journal publication is an important indicator of research productivity for academics and academic institutions. Similarly, Kapp et al. (2011) view publishing research work as being a key indicator of academic quality and worth, whereas North et al. (2011), note that research output affects both the strength and funding of universities. Apart from improving university ranking, research publications are also known to make important contributions to the growth and development of industries and formulation of government policies, thus enhancing national and global development. Additionally, Geiger (2015) established that research helps produce wealth and public support that is needed for sustainable development. This shows that universities and general development at national level may stagnate when research is not published as policies may not be informed. For academicians perishing, could be denial of promotion and a requirement of assuming a heavy teaching load in fear of termination of contracts hence for academicians to progress through their career, the rule of publish or perish must be obeyed (Moosa, 2018).

Although research and publications have been known to improve university ranking and foster development, studies have however, shown that many universities in Africa do not undertake research and often times struggle to publish in reputable high impact journals (Toit 2009, Managa 2013, Kumwenda 2015). Tierney, (2012) for example argued that higher education institutions in Africa have weak research and innovation capacities due to various challenges that they encounter. He pointed out that universities in Africa do not possess adequate research capabilities, infrastructure and facilities, funding needed to make them active beneficiaries of global knowledge and/or to generate knowledge, innovation and problem solving. He adds that these institutions face critical shortage of staff to adapt and generate knowledge. Another notable challenge as advanced by Oshikoya and Hussain (2004) is lack of technology

which is not the case in the western countries. Furthermore, Ngulube (2004) notes that many African universities which sent articles to Nigeria, Kenya, Botswana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, have significant challenges associated with ownership of personal and/or government computers that could have enhanced the authors' access to information. Although more positive changes have taken place since 2004 in this regard, challenges continue to manifest in different forms regarding publishing research output, hence the enquiry.

Another notable and often neglected challenge to publishing scholarly articles is the English language which is mostly the second language for most if not all African countries.

The aim of this study was to assess the challenges faced by the University of Zambia academic members of staff in publishing in high impact journals. Zambia, a sub Saharan Africa country of some 17 million citizens, has only seven public universities. Of the seven, only three universities have been in existence for over 20 years with the four having only recently been upgraded to degree awarding institutions. The University of Zambia is the oldest university in the country; it was established in 1966. The institution has over seven different schools with over 800 academic members of staff, it has a directorate of graduate studies and offers undergraduate, masters and PhD programmes. In December 2018, about 2500 masters' students were enrolled and over 100 PhDs. This makes the University of Zambia a fertile ground for research which should translate into a robust publication output. An internet search has shown that very few publications from the University of Zambia are visible online.

Literature and Theoretical underpinning on Research and publication

Magolda (2010) explained that research is a constructive development pedagogy in which teachers model the process of constructing knowledge in their disciplines, teach that process to students and give students opportunities to practice and become proficient at it. However, the twin principal research mandate of universities and

public-funded organizations are to extend commercial or industrial application of their research outputs and advancing the frontiers of knowledge and generating quality human resources. Chipeta and Nyambe (2012) also note that universities role has dramatically changed from what was in the late 19th and 20th centuries and now these institutions are portraying themselves as guardians of public knowledge, as engines of up-to-date economy and as expanders of frontiers of knowledge in the scientific and technological domains. Universities are now conveying their missions in line with these roles that faculty's involvement in research activities and publishing can be taken as index of institutional status (Magolda, 2010).

Some studies claim that institutional status and output contribute to benchmarking of any institution's research proliferation (Chipeta & Nyambe 2012 Masaiti, and Mwale, 2017). An increase in research publication has become a guarantee for prestige and an important factor for institutional ranking (Tierney, 2012). Faculties' annual research production is not only used as a criterion for lecturer's promotion but also lifts university's reputation and ranking. This boosted status may cause corresponding increases in student enrolment and may justify the claim for greater incentives and, in some countries, grants from government and donor agencies while the opposite may result in perishing of an institution.

Tierney, (2012) argued that higher education institutions in Africa have weak research and innovation capacities due to various challenges they encounter. He pointed out that universities in Africa do not possess adequate research capabilities, infrastructure and facilities, funding needed to make them active beneficiaries of global knowledge and/or to generate knowledge innovation and problem solving. Higher education institutions in Africa face critical shortage of staff to adapt and generate knowledge and innovate. Based on the reviewed literature in the previous sections, could it be that the same challenges are being experienced by academicians in terms of publishing high impact journal articles at the University of Zambia? Kumwenda (2015) conducted a qualitative exploratory study on

challenges facing young African scientists in their research careers. The research involved young researchers from Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Benin, Zimbabwe, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo who attended the Teaching and Research in Natural Sciences for Development (TREND). Participants outlined different challenges that they faced during their early careers.

The first challenge was related to the sustainability of research ambitions. Respondents indicated that after developing interest to start a career in research, they needed a lot of support to move forward such as mentorship from senior researchers. Lecturers indicated that most potential mentors were too busy with their work and had little time for junior researchers. Kumwenda (2015) confirms the above challenges among junior researchers. Nevertheless, Kumwenda (2015) focused on challenges that were faced by junior researchers in research and publication from various countries in Africa while the current study focus was on challenges faced by senior academicians in research publications particularly at the University of Zambia. Another obstacle established in the same research was lack of capacity to initiate research by African scholars, most of the African scholar's arc do-opted in research ideas that are western driven as they lack the funds themselves. This limits their potential to publish as they are not equal partners in these studies (Chipeta and Nyambe, 2012). However, literature on the challenges that are limiting the University of Zambia in research and publication are not well documented. Thus, this study intended to fill this gap.

Methodology

This study was purely qualitative and adopted a descriptive design. The target population was senior lecturers, and Deans from the seven schools. Excluded were senior lectures who had served the institution for less than 5 years. This was done to ensure that only participants who have been in the university for more than 5 years comprised the sample with an understanding that they have a comprehensive

understanding of what happens in the university regarding research and publication. The total sample for the study was 40 made up of 33 senior lectures from the seven school and 7 deans. Purposive sampling procedure was utilized because the sample composed of participants that had characteristics representative or typical attributes of the population. Additionally, participants were also sampled based on the nature of their positions.

Instruments for data collection

The research instrument utilized was a structured interview. The structured interview questions enabled the researchers to pre-plan the questions to be asked to the respondents about the problem under investigations as Borg and Gall, (1996); and Haralambos and Holborn, (1995) explained.

Data analysis

The analysis of data for this study was done using emerging themes. According to Valsiner (2006) thematic analysis involves the researcher asking broad questions and collecting word data from participants and he or she then asks for related themes and described the information in themes and patterns exclusive to that set of participants. We used the Valsiner definition in coming up with the themes.

Presentation of findings

The research findings were analyzed so that comprehensive meanings from the data were obtained. The findings are presented according to the thematic areas that were established during data analysis. To establish the extent of research output at the University of Zambia, respondents were asked several questions. The following are some of the themes that emerged.

Research output

When asked about whether lecturers were engaging in research, it was established that almost all lecturers were engaged in various research ranging from basic to action, and with the introduction of the H-Index the motivation to publish has gone up. The study also found that most research was self-sponsored but some lecturers did get grants for their studies.

It was also found that most lecturers attended conferences, symposia and workshops where their work was disseminated while others stated that they wrote research reports especially if the research was funded. Asked whether the research translated into scholarly journal articles that were published in high impact journals, most of the lecturers including Deans and directors stated that this was quite hard. When asked why, it turned out that most of the lecturers used their personal money to fund research which made it difficult for them to engage in research at larger scale which is usually appreciated by renowned high impact journals. One participant for example echoed that;"since the University itself is not much involved in generating resources in funding research work to enhance the output of research at the institution it is very difficult for us to publish in high impact journals*".*

Another participant responded stating that:

> *Even if one has funds, a grant for research, researchers are restricted to some conditions. Which make it so hard for them to publish. For example, in my last study which was sponsored, while I was busy supervising the researchers and entering the data my colleagues who I partnered with to get the grant were busy writing articles by the time I realized all the themes I was interested in were taken.*

One participant noted that an improvement was seen in terms of research output and publications with the introduction of H-Index as a promotion requirement, he added that the involvement of post

graduate students in research has increased the number of research publications.

Challenges faced by Academic members of staff in Publishing

When asked about the challenges faced in research publications 30 respondents stated that they faced challenges to publish. The challenges ranged from inadequate research funds, lack of collaboration opportunities, heavy workloads, poor training in statistical methods, lack of mentorship among young lecturers, reviews and processing time for some journals, language barriers, over reliance on western researchers. One of the participants stated that:

> *I have serious challenges when it comes to material and human resources. In reference to human resources, I have a problem to find teammates at local and international level to ease up research demands. It takes a lot for one to find partners to collaborate with in terms of research work for easy output or publication of journal articles particularly in high impact journal articles.*

He further hinted that, in terms of material resources challenges may include though not limited to recent journal articles for literature consultations, recent books, finances, internet among others. Another respondent said that:

> *I do not face challenges in research publications like what other researchers consider to be obstacles in terms of funding; competition and rejection of journal articles to be published in high impact domains are not challenges but opportunities to plan and do a quality research.*"

It must be stated that among the participants only 1 out of 40 stated that they had no problems generating funds for research. The participant briefly explained that:

before I commission any research, I must generate resources through various innovations. One complained of competition, stating that *international (high impact) journal rejection especially those from non- English-speaking countries such as Zambia.*

Another participant stated that heavy workloads give more responsibilities hence, reduces chances of doing research work. He further gave a practical example, stating that:

Countries like South Africa and Kenya lectures are given less workloads which allow them to have ample time for research work. Additionally, I should point out that in the case of University of Zambia, the school of natural sciences, engineering and education lectures have heavy workloads in terms of courses to teach, therefore, they have less time for research work.

Measures to increase research publications

When asked about measures that can be taken to enhance publication output at the institution, it was realized that the institution is already putting measures in place through the directorate of post graduate studies by encouraging lectures to do joint research with students and giving minor seed grants to deserving lecturers. Most of the lecturers acknowledged the need to enhance funding of research by the institution, to better manage available resources, improving access to books, having a deliberate policy to compel lecturers to publish at least an article each year, and awarding or giving of incentives to motivate academicians who published in high impact journals. One of the participants commented that:

there is need to improve funding of research as well as finding better ways of managing available resources such as banked books in the library, internet connection services and human resources. I also suggest the need to implement a deliberate policy for each lecturer to produce at least one research paper in a year

In terms of inter departmental collaboration one of the participants echoed the following "There is need to seriously emphasize on cross departmental team work in research among academicians. For instance, a research can be conducted within the school with a view of coming up with a high impact journal"

Some participants also indicated that; there was need to advertise the University of Zambia journal articles to the general public. This was observed in the sense that sometimes the journals with quality information were not in the public domain henceforth, the need to advertise these journals to the public.

Generally, the study found that there are limited funds allocated to research and publishing in a high impact factor journal is a challenge, hence, deliberate policies that increase research support and makes research policies that compel lectures to at least publish an article in a year would help in increasing the number of publications and consequently the University of Zambia's ranking.

Discussion of findings

The study established that lecturers were engaged in different types of research for instance basic and action research. Often, lecturers used their own resources to fund research whilst some lecturers accessed grants to aid their research activities. Lecturers often attended conferences, symposia and workshops to disseminate the research findings. Despite the lecturers being able to participate in different research and symposia, it has been difficult to publish their findings in high impact journals because most of the research they were engaged in was done at small scale. High impact journals are journals that are frequently read and whose work is highly cited (Garfield, 2006). Most high impact journals require that the research findings are generated from a relatively large sample especially if its social research. Although the challenges have been physically experienced in the process of having the research output, introduction of H-Index is showing satisfactory results in that almost every lecturer is focusing on research to publish to gain the H-index

necessary for promotion within the University academic ranks and escape the perish that comes as result of not having publications.

The challenges that academic members of staff faced in publishing included inadequate research funds. Research funds play a very pivotal role in sustaining the research process. If adequate funds are available for research, development of the research instruments and logistical costs for the entire research process, it becomes easy to implement a longitudinal study or carry out a survey with a relatively big sample size which might be key to have results that are representative of the study population, however, lecturers faced financial limitations that impeded their involvement in research activities. Lack of collaboration opportunities was yet another challenge faced by academicians.

Although collaborations between and among different research expertise is key in ensuring the research findings are robust, this appeared to be weak among academicians. In cases where collaborations are present most of the scholars are co-opted by western scholars who have different research agendas and, in most cases, lecturers are not present at the initial stage of proposal development making publications difficult (Chipeta and Nyambe 2012). Other challenges identified by the study included heavy workloads which took much of the time for lecturers. Instead of investing much time on research, academicians spent more time on attending to students work due to high workload arising from low staffing levels necessitated by university limited resources. Poor training in statistical methods was another stumbling block to have robust findings to be published. Some studies require statistical competence for data to be analyzed, however, some academic staff do not have statistical competence thus, their sphere of understanding research is limited. Among other challenges identified were lack of mentorship among young lecturers, bias in terms of reviews and processing time for some journals and language barrier. Language is key in communication and affects writing skills (Mbewe 2015, Mbewe e.tal, 2016, Mwanza-Kabaghe, 2015, Mwanza-Kabaghe

e.tal 2015,) hence, language barriers arising from the use of English pose limitations on academic members of staff since English is used in most journals where they must publish their articles. This affects actual investment in human beings through education as emphasized by human capital theory.

Regarding the measures to increase research publications, the study revealed that improving the research funds and prudent management of the available academic resources would play a key role in increasing research publications. In line with increasing the research funds, it is important to note that availability of resources remains fundamental for research implementation process. Researchers may need funds for piloting of research instruments and other logistical costs if they are to be involved in studies that generates robust results. Limited financial support for researchers makes the research process so difficult to plan and implement the research process as Kumwenda (2015) documents that investment in human resource is affected by lack of funding. Hence, despite investment in human resource being so key as advanced by the human capital theory, it appears that little is being done due to limited research being conducted as a results of limited funding. If the funding is extended to the students at postgraduate level in their different research projects it may serve as a strong drive for the students and their lecturers to embark on research that impacts on practice and transform the communities. Further, formulation of a deliberate policy that would compel lecturers to at least publish one article in a year in a high impact journal and rewarding of the deserving lecturers to stimulate research interest in the lecturers would enhance research publication. Such deliberate policies focusing on publication of an article and rewarding deserving lecturers   would help the lecturers that may not have interest or motivation to publish. Another measure that was well articulated was the need to have inter departmental collaboration and mentorship for young lecturers this would help them not to land themselves in the perishing boat

Conclusion

The study revealed that lecturers were engaged in different types of research and they attended conferences, symposiums and workshops to disseminate the research findings, however, they continued to face challenges in resources to be used in the research implementation process. What was encouraging is the fact that consensus to redress the situation appeared to have been reached. Therefore, we recommend increase in research funds allocation and management of the available academic resources. coupled with formulation of a deliberate policy to compel lecturers to at least publish one article in a high impact journal annually because it would help in not only sharing the research findings but also in improving the University of Zambia ranking and on preventing the lecturers from perishing on the academic scene due to stagnation arising from not having publications.

Limitations

As the choice to participate in the study was solely determined by the number of years served in the university and having served for a long time, it is possible that the views of the senior lecturers could differ from those of young lecturers who could have had other opportunities and may naturally view things from a different perspective. It is, for instance, possible that the challenges faced by senior lecturers are not the same as those that are faced by junior lecturers. Being a qualitative study and the fact that this study was done at one institution in the country limits it.

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